Testimony of Henry Jenkins before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee on May 4, 1999

1) Henry Jenkins, the Director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program, has devoted fifteen years of his life to researching and writing about various questions concerning the aesthetic, social, and cultural impact of popular culture. His research has increasingly centered around children and youth in a "hypermediated" culture.

2) So far, most of the public debate surrounding the Littleton shootings has reflected a desire to understand what the media are doing to our children. Instead, we should be focusing our attention on understanding what our children are doing with media

3)Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two Littleton shooters, had an especially complex relationship to popular culture, drawing together a complex personal mythology from phrases, images and ideas drawn from popular music, cinema, television, video games, and the net. For the most part, their cultural choices were common to many American teenagers but the particular meanings they attached to those artifacts reflected their personal demons, psychological imbalances, and social maladjustments. Other children drew inspiration from many of these same media products but constructed a more creative and nurturing on-line environment. The difference rests not in the symbols but in the meanings that different youths attach to those symbols, based on their direct social experiences.

4)The dominant tradition of media effects research shows only a limited interest in the meanings that get attached to various images of media violence that circulate through popular culture. Media effects researchers must abstract "violent acts" from their specific contexts in the fictional stories and in the lives of American teenagers and this process distorts their understanding of what makes these images socially and culturally meaningful.

5) Children at an early age draw meaningful distinctions between images that document real or realistic forms of violence and those that depict fantastic or stylized violence. Part of what makes play pleasurable is that play separates actions from their real world consequences. Through play, children gain a power over their environment often denied them in everyday social interactions.

6) The media backlash against popular culture in the wake of the Littleton shootings reflects three factors -- our generational anxiety about the transition from adolescence to adulthood, our technophobic fears about our children's greater comfort with digital technologies, and our painful discovery of aspects of our children's play and fantasy lives that have long existed but were once hidden from view. Because the symbols of adolescent culture are intentionally cryptic, adults read into those symbols the things they fear the most about and for their children.

7)All of the above suggests a basic conclusion: banning specific media images will have little or no impact on the problem of youth crime, because doing so gets at symbols, not at the meanings those symbols carry and not at the social reality that gives such urgency to teens' investments in those cultural materials. We need to focus research attention on what children are doing with these new media, what place the contents of popular culture have assumed in their social and cultural life, and what personal and subcultural meanings they invest in such symbols. The best

way to do that is to talk and listen to our children about the forms of culture that matter to them. By contrast, many schools have responded to the Littleton shootings by cutting children off from access to the web and the net, silencing discussion of the social factors that contributed to the shootings, and intensifying the pressure confirm to mainstream expectations.

8)One can propose a range of more constructive solutions to the concerns which have surfaced in the wake of the shootings, including building stronger communities on the web for children at risk, making the schools more sensitive to issues of cultural diversity, expanding our commitment to media education so we can have meaningful discussions of the place of popular culture in children's lives, expanding the kinds of information parents have available to them as they make decisions about their children's access to popular culture, and challenging the media industry to research why violent imagery appeals to adolescents and to become more creative to developing alternative fantasies that respond to those same needs.